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RUEHXS/ASEAN REGIONAL FORUM

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SUBJECT: VIETNAM RELIGIOUS FREEDOM UPDATE

REF: A) DRL/IRF ADAMSON-JENSEN E-MAIL 8/30; B) HANOI 1520; C) HCMC 987

1. (SBU) This cable summarizes religious freedom developments in Vietnam during the week ending September 1. This summary was coordinated with ConGen Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC).

Hanoi Developments

2. (SBU) Religious prisoner Ma Van Bay's impending National Day amnesty and release was reported by international press. Post has not been able to confirm if he is actually out of prison yet. (Note: If post is unable to confirm Bay's release in the next week, the Ambassador -- who will be traveling to Bay's home province of Ha Giang on September 12 -- will request confirmation of Bay's from with provincial officials).

3. (SBU) On August 30, the Evangelical Church of Vietnam North (ECVN) provided us with a list of 150 "mature" congregations out of the list of 534 house churches that have completed their applications in the North. These 150 were selected by the ECVN on the basis of geographic distribution, giving priority to those with longer outstanding applications and to those located in areas with more progressive local officials, in the theory that these 150 churches should be easy for the CRA to register quickly. We provided the list to the MFA and CRA on August 30.

4. (SBU) Despite repeated requests and the intervention of the MFA, Thanh Hoa provincial authorities refused to allow Poloff to visit the "Full Gospel" house church in Thieu Vien Commune and to investigate reports that two Commune officials who participated in the beating incident in June (Ref B) were reprimanded and fined. The province claimed that "flooding" made it impossible to visit the commune. We have reiterated our request to visit Thanh Hoa Province with the target date of September 7.

5. (U) Preparations for Chris Seiple's Institute of Global Engagement (IGE) "Religion and Rule of Law in Southeast Asia" Conference in Hanoi (September 7-11) continued and are nearing completion. The Ambassador will host a reception for the sixty-nine IGE and GVN participants on September 8.

Ho Chi Minh City Developments

6. (SBU) HCMC CRA has completed training of district-level CRA officials on how to process registrations from local house churches. They have set out a road map to process qualified house churches. In this process, they have run into a problem in that some house churches do not have legal rights to the house that they are using as a church. The house may be rented, for example, but without any formal legal contract or approval from the owner that it could be used as a church. Under national CRA guidelines, these properties do not qualify for registration. HCMC authorities are trying to

find a way to sort out this issue to facilitate registration. Five HCMC districts have begun to invite house churches to register. Pastor No and Pastor Quang were also invited. Roadmap calls for all registrations to be finished by early October, with perhaps some registrations being announced by mid-September.

¶7. (SBU) Per Ref C, on August 30, the Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam broke ground for a new bible college in HCMC's District Two.

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